

“The Day of the Big Gun Shoot”: The Union Occupation of Beaufort and the Rise of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers

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Abstract: This essay details the events surrounding the Union Army’s occupation of Beaufort, South Carolina, during the American Civil War, and the opportunities that arose for the area’s Black population. Although the Reconstruction era did not formally begin until after the war ended, reconstruction efforts began well before Robert E. Lee capitulated. The Battle of Port Royal on November 7, 1861, off the coast of the South Carolina’s Sea Islands and subsequent Union occupation resulted in an exodus of the region’s white population, leaving over 10,000 enslaved people seemingly free. Almost immediately after the Union victory, a myriad of northerners saw an opportunity not only to employ the area’s enslaved people, but to test their self-sustaining abilities. Much is written about this “Port Royal Experiment”; however, little literature exists on one of the greatest achievements during the experiment: the creation of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers. Historians usually treat the Union Army’s first formal Black regiment as a side note to the Port Royal Experiment. To the contrary, the creation and military service of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers was a watershed moment in the transition of South Carolina enslaved people to freedmen to soldiers.

On November 7, 1861, Union naval vessels fired cannons on two Confederate forts protecting South Carolina’s Port Royal Sound. Confederate cannons exchanged fire; however, their efforts were futile. As the cannons roared on the cloudless day, Sam Mitchell, an enslaved boy living on nearby Lady’s Island, asked his mother if the loud noise was thunder. His mother exclaimed, “Son, dat ain’t no t’under, dat Yankee come to gib you Freedom.”¹ Although only four hours in length, the Battle of Port Royal was the most momentous battle of the Civil War for the area’s enslaved population. The naval battle was part of Abraham Lincoln’s plan for a naval blockade across the Eastern Seaboard in hopes of controlling the South’s harbors. The Port Royal Sound, in between Charleston and Savannah, fell within South Carolina’s Beaufort District, and was one of the many Sea Islands along the coast.² The Battle of Port Royal establish Union control over the Beaufort District.³ The area’s enslaved population was suddenly presented with the opportunity for freedom, and they were much more aware of their surroundings and the community’s happenings than most whites gave them credit for. Sam Mitchell’s mother was right, the presence of the Union fleet caused an exodus of the Sea Islands’ white residents and Confederate soldiers, leaving over 10,000 enslaved people seemingly free.⁴ The Battle of Port Royal was then known to the Beaufort District’s enslaved residents as the “Day of the Big Gun Shoot.”⁵ Beaufort would never be the same.

¹ Sam Mitchell, “Stories from Ex-Enslaved people, Sam Mitchell,” *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3*, 202, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.143/?sp=204&st=image&r=-0.344,-0.082,1.717,0.731,0> (accessed February 26, 2023).

² The Beaufort District was a term from South Carolina’s colonial era. The Beaufort District consisted of Port Royal Island, St. Helena Island, Lady’s Island, and several other small Sea Islands. The title “District” was stripped in 1865 and the area officially became Beaufort County in 1868.

³ Samuel F. DuPont, “The Bearer... Will... Carry with Him the Captured Flags,” quoted in *Port Royal Under Six Flags*, ed. Katharine M. Jones (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1960), 225-227, and “The Latest War News,” *New York Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1861.

⁴ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 371.

⁵ Lawrence S. Rowland, Alexander Moore, and George C. Rogers, Jr., *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina, Volume 1, 1514-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 452.

Prior to that fateful day, South Carolina was the center of anti-Union rhetoric and secession. As politicians argued with one another over the institution of slavery, so too did their constituents. The argument over human bondage pitted North versus South, and brother versus brother. South Carolina had been a slave society since its inception. Slavery and its financial gains were imbedded in every aspect of South Carolina society.⁶ The residents of Beaufort, both white and black, could not have known that the cannon fire that November would have the effect it did on their society. The Beaufort District, like the rest of South Carolina, lived in a social order surrounded by chattel slavery. However, that would all change once Union forces controlled the Sea Islands. The Union Army's occupation of the Beaufort District caused its white residents to flee, leaving enslaved Blacks without masters; all of which brought perpetual changes to the region. The most profound impact, however, was the opportunity for some of the enslaved to turn from enslaved people to soldiers.

The 1st South Carolina Volunteers are supplementary information in the annals of Civil War history. The historians that have previously written on the 1st South Carolina Volunteers mainly did so within a larger story. When authoring a text covering the history of Beaufort County, historian Stephen R. Wise mentioned the all-black unit many times. He described the Black troops as General Rufus Saxton's "glorious achievements," during his tenure as the military governor of the Department of the South.⁷ As a smaller story within a biography of General David Hunter, who was a staunch abolitionist, lawyer, and author, Edward A. Miller Jr., mentioned the 1st South Carolina Volunteers on several occasions. Regarding the 1st South Carolina Volunteer's largest mission, albeit minuscule compared to the great battles in different theatres of war, Miller wrote, "The expedition went well enough, and the soldiers behaved satisfactorily under fire, but the mission was minor."⁸ One of the largest works on the unit was written by Stephen V. Ash and published by W. W. Norton & Company in 2008. However, his text covered one mission of the unit, the same one Miller described as "minor." Ash wrote at length to detail the unit's seizing efforts of Confederates stationed in Jacksonville, Florida. But the history of the unit from its creation, picket, and garrison duties during the war, and through its entirety are not covered. Ash's work is self-admittedly lacking in overall substance. Ash explained his book is a one-sided view of the military expedition to Florida, specifically, a Union perspective and mainly Thomas Wentworth Higginson's.⁹ Ash's work is only meant to cover a brief part of the 1st South Carolina Volunteer's history. John Saucer published a book covering the unit, which is well-written and uses a respectable bibliography. However, he is an enthusiast, not a historian. The book was published by the company America Through Time which is not renowned for editorial prestige. There is an abundance of primary sources for a full-length monograph to be published on the historic all-black unit. Yet it seems no one has done so. This paper details the reasoning for the unit's

⁶ Robert Olwell, *Masters, Enslaved people, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country 1740-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 5.

⁷ Stephen R. Wise, Lawrence S. Rowland, and Gerhard Spieler, *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina, Volume 2, Rebellion, Reconstruction, and Redemption, 1861-1893* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 453.

⁸ Edward A. Miller Jr., *Lincoln's Abolitionist General: The Biography of David Hunter* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 138.

⁹ Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), xiii-xiv.

creation, provides a brief history of it, and argues that the creation of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers was a defining moment not just for the Civil War era but all of America's history. However, this essay is inadequate in serving as a monograph which the 1st South Carolina Volunteers deserve.

For almost two hundred years before the start of the American Civil War, South Carolina had been a slave colony. South Carolina had more enslaved people than any other of Britain's North American colonies.¹⁰ Well before the start of the Civil War, Beaufort had already been a land nearly perfect for agriculture, and a large labor force to work the land. The Sea Islands that fell within Beaufort District grew the world-renowned "Sea Island cotton." The Sea Island cotton that was able to be produced in abundance towards the end of the eighteenth-century caused an increase in demand for physical laborers. Between 1804 and 1808, traders brought over forty-thousand enslaved Africans into the Beaufort District.¹¹ Thus, the creolization of whites, Blacks, and the Gullah culture became forever intertwined with Beaufort's society.¹² The of Beaufort on Port Royal Island became a place of fine mansions and the home to several plantation owners of the surrounding Sea Islands.¹³ During the 1850s, the Beaufort District went through a period of prosperity, now known as the "second cotton boom."¹⁴ Fertile land, over 10,000 enslaved people, and nearby harbors allowed the Beaufort area's cotton to sail to worldwide markets. The 1850 census put South Carolina at a population of 668,000, with more than half being enslaved.¹⁵ In Beaufort, eighty-three percent of the population were enslaved.¹⁶ With the approximate value of each enslaved person being one thousand dollars, Beaufort was a wealthy town and very much a society built around slavery.¹⁷ Although Beaufort's wealthy, slave-owning class may have enjoyed their prosperity and livelihood, the rhetoric of secession and potential war was looming.

The Beaufort District's slave-owning class was ready to separate from the Union as early as 1850. The Beaufort District Southern Rights Association made a written statement on November 16, 1850, which in part stated, "we regard domestic slavery as the great safeguard of political freedom... That a Government which threatens its security or infringes the integrity of its safeguard, is not only useless but dangerous."¹⁸ Although the rest of South Carolina did not share the same convictions in 1850, they would only a decade later. Historian Lawrence S. Rowland summarized Beaufort's excitement for secession by stating, "No district in the state had contributed more to the secession movement than the Beaufort District. No district in America was to lose more as a result."¹⁹ As the year 1860 neared its end and Lincoln's Republican-led presidency loomed, South Carolina's residents, many of whom relied on slavery for their livelihoods,

¹⁰ Olwell, *Masters, Enslaved people, and Subjects*, 5.

¹¹ Rowland, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume I*, 347-348.

¹² Rowland, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume I*, 350.

¹³ "The Expedition to South Carolina," *New York Daily Tribune*, November 9, 1861.

¹⁴ Rowland, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume I*, 368.

¹⁵ Walter A. McDougall, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829-1877* (New York: Harper Collin, 2008), 110-111.

¹⁶ Edward A. Miller Jr., *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁷ Rowland, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume I*, 369.

¹⁸ Rowland, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume I*, 430.

¹⁹ Rowland, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume I*, 441.

wanted to break away from the upcoming administration. The *Charleston Mercury* expressed in the fall of 1860, “The issue before the country is the extinction of slavery.”²⁰ Southern Democrats felt that to protect slavery, they would have to avoid Lincoln’s federal control. On December 20, 1860, the legislators of South Carolina unanimously voted to secede from the Union.²¹ The tipping point had finally come between North and South, and less than four months later, Confederates fired their cannons and mortars at Fort Sumter.

Although the battle in the Charleston Harbor started the American Civil War, it was the Battle of Port Royal in November 1861 that had the most profound effect on Beaufort District’s enslaved people. As Beaufort’s enslaved people noticed the departure of its white residents, several enslaved people began looting parts of town and many of its fine mansions. Some began breaking cotton gins and burning large amounts of cotton, an obvious retaliation for the painstaking labor that was forced on their lives.²² Union soldiers joined their reprisal but were soon stopped by Union officers.²³ Captain Hazard Stevens described the looting as such, “[the enslaved people were] smashing doors, mirrors and furniture, and appropriating all that took their fancy...they...reveled in unwonted idleness and luxury, feasting upon the corn, cattle and turkeys of their fugitive masters.”²⁴ Captain Samuel Francis Du Pont, who led the Union vessels into Port Royal, also bore witness to the white exodus of Beaufort and its immediate aftermath. Du Pont wrote to his wife, “Negroes are wild with joy and revenge, robbing Beaufort - on the other hand they have been shot down, they say, like dogs because they would not go off with their masters.”²⁵ The surviving enslaved population was no longer under the control of their previous masters; however, unbeknownst to them in the immediate aftermath, they were now known as “contraband” of the Federal forces.²⁶ The term wisely came from Major General Benjamin Butler in May 1861. At Fort Monroe in Hampton, Virginia, three enslaved people entered the Union lines, and Butler refused to return the fugitives to the nearby Confederate forces. As the enslaved people were used by the Confederates to build fortifications and other tasks, thereby helping the Confederate war effort, Butler justified not returning the runaways because they would, in turn, continue to help the Confederates wage war. Shortly after Butler’s action and witty word choice, the Secretary of War and Congress approved of titling enslaved people who ran away and into Union control as “contraband articles of war.”²⁷

²⁰ “What Shall the South Carolina Legislature Do?” *Charleston Mercury*, November 3, 1860, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/sixteen-months-to-sumter/newspaper-index/charleston-mercury/what-shall-the-south-carolina-legislature-do> (accessed February 15, 2023).

²¹ McDougall, *Throes of Democracy*, 395.

²² “The Pillage at Port Royal,” *New York Daily Tribune*, November 16, 1861.

²³ Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 14-17.

²⁴ Hazard Stevens, “General Stevens Was Ordered...To Occupy Beaufort,” quoted in *Port Royal Under Six Flags*, ed. Katharine M. Jones, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1960), 246.

²⁵ Wise, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume 2*, 28.

²⁶ James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 102.

²⁷ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 13-15, United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series III, Volume I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), 243-245, and Wise, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume 2*, 23.

Leaders in Washington saw an opportunity to employ Beaufort's contrabands, essentially performing the same work they did as enslaved people for their masters. The difference now being they would be paid for their work by the federal government. Authorities wanted to sell the region's cotton, using the financial gains to support the war effort.²⁸ Thus, a sort of experiment began in the Beaufort District. Federal authorities decided to introduce, as historian Stephen R. Wise explained, "labor and social reforms that would uplift the status of former enslaved people by employing them in a free-market economy and preparing them to become citizens."²⁹ As the "contrabands" proved their worth in the free-market economy, authorities then saw their value to the military. No Union soldier knew the land around Beaufort better than the enslaved people who had lived there for their entire lives. Soon after the Battle of Port Royal, the Union forces began using them within their area of operations as "guides, spies, and ship pilots."³⁰ However, the question of whether the freed enslaved people were truly free lingered. Regardless of the enslaved people's legal freedom, Union presence changed the lives of the areas' Blacks, including women.

Although not from Beaufort, the life of Susie King Taylor during the Civil War is an example of how the lives of Black people changed in the Beaufort area during the war. Taylor was born enslaved in Georgia and raised in Savannah. Unlike most enslaved people, Taylor was taught to read and write as a child, a talent that would prove most useful later in her life.³¹ Like many enslaved people in the South at the beginning of the Civil War, Taylor had heard of the Union soldiers, or "Yankees." Southerners had spread lies about the northern troops in an effort to scare the enslaved people. One such lie was that the enslaved people, if caught by the Yankees, would be used like horses and forced to pull carts. Taylor and her family were not fooled by the southerners' tricks. They looked forward to one day encountering the Yankees and even sang songs regarding their hopeful rendezvous.³² For Taylor, that day came when Union forces arrived near the Savannah harbor, with their rifled cannons aimed at Fort Pulaski.

Federal forces began bombarding the Confederate-held Fort Pulaski on April 10, 1862. Taylor, only fourteen-years-old at the time, described the action by saying, "I remember what a roar and din the guns made. They jarred the earth for miles." Taylor and her enslaved family anxiously awaited the outcome of the artillery duel. Once the opportunity came, they made their way to Union lines. It was then that Taylor exclaimed, "and at last, to my unbounded joy, I saw the 'Yankee.'"³³ This was an opportune time to be within proximity of Federal forces. Major General David Hunter, the commander of the Department of the South, announced after the Confederate surrender of Fort Pulaski that all enslaved people within the area were free. Hunter's proclamation declared martial law in his army's held territories, and he attempted to raise a unit of freed men while he was on Hilton Head Island, not far from downtown Beaufort.³⁴ It was

²⁸ Oakes, *Freedom National*, 201-202.

²⁹ Wise, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume 2*, 67.

³⁰ Wise, *The History of Beaufort County, Volume 2*, 70.

³¹ Susie King Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, ed. Patricia W. Romero and Willie Lee Rose, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1988), 20-30.

³² Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 32.

³³ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 33.

³⁴ Oakes, *Freedom National*, 213-214; "Right Between the Eyes," *New York Daily Tribune*, May 9, 1862.

then that Taylor met a Union officer, Captain Whitmore, who learned Taylor could read, write, and sew.³⁵ Whitmore informed Commodore Goldsborough of Taylor's abilities. Goldsborough "wished [her] to take charge of a school for the children on the island."³⁶ It was these interactions between Susie King Taylor and Union troops that would put Taylor at the center of the Union occupation of the Beaufort District.

During this time, Susie King Taylor witnessed the bravery of freed enslaved people firsthand as they skirmished with Confederate forces throughout the Sea Islands. When Union officers recruited Blacks for service in Hunter's regiment, Taylor noted that they wanted "to get all the men possible to finish filling his regiment which he had organized in March 1862. He had heard of the skirmish on this island and was very much pleased at the bravery shown by these men."³⁷ Hunter's proclamation and further attempts to use freed enslaved people in his war effort was put on hold. Federal policy had not to that point decided whether "contrabands" should or could be used as soldiers. President Lincoln rescinded Hunter's orders a few weeks after Hunter issued them.³⁸ Politics at play, President Lincoln was not ready to bargain with Black troops quite yet.

Three months later, however, that policy changed. The growing number of "contrabands" enticed leaders in Washington to find soldierly use in the able-bodied men. After much political debate, Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act on July 17, 1862, which authorized the president "to employ as many persons of African descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of this rebellion."³⁹ Soon after, Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, authorized the military governor of the Department of the South, General Rufus Saxton, Hunter's commander, to enlist Black troops. To lead the newly formed regiment of freed people, Saxton chose Thomas Wentworth Higginson in November 1862.⁴⁰ Colonel Higginson rose to be one of the most instrumental figures for the betterment of the Beaufort District's freed people. Colonel Higginson accepted command of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers only a few days after receiving a letter dated November 5, 1862, from General Saxton, asking him to do so.⁴¹ Higginson was a Massachusetts abolitionist and ardent supporter of John Brown. He was serving as a captain in the 51st Massachusetts when he received Saxton's request. He had long wanted to arm Black troops and simply could not turn down the opportunity provided by Saxton.⁴² Of his opportunity, Higginson wrote, "I had been an abolitionist too long, and had known John Brown too well, not to feel a thrill of joy at last on finding myself in the position where he only wished to be."⁴³ When Higginson took command of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, his regiment numbered approximately 800 men who had been enslaved

³⁵ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 33.

³⁶ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 37.

³⁷ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 41.

³⁸ Abraham Lincoln, *Presidential Proclamation 90 by Abraham Lincoln Revoking General David Hunter's Order of Military Emancipation*, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/4656009> (accessed February 26, 2023).

³⁹ U.S. Congress, *The Second Confiscation Act, July 17, 1862*, www.freedmen.umd.edu/conact2.htm (accessed February 26, 2023).

⁴⁰ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1982), 2.

⁴¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 2.

⁴² Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 193.

⁴³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 4

people just one year before his arrival. Some of the men had already been exposed to combat; however, Higginson saw a crucial need for discipline within his ranks.⁴⁴

Higginson and his select core of white officers insisted on drilling the men and introducing them to life in military camp. Higginson knew his unit would serve as a spectacle to the world which motivated him to turn his formerly enslaved people into men possessing soldierly virtue.⁴⁵ After weeks of constant drill, Higginson saw how his unit performed much better than expected, by what he believed would be any officer's standards. Higginson noted, "I do not see the slightest obstacle, in the nature of the blacks, to making them good soldiers, but rather the contrary. They take ready to drill, and do not object to discipline; they are not especially dull or inattentive; they seem fully to understand the importance of the contest, and of their share in it."⁴⁶ Regarding their alertness, Higginson observed the Black soldiers proving their merit as exceptional sentinels, showcasing their ability to understand the importance of their guard duties. Higginson even explained that his Black troops proved to be more alert and better guards than his previous unit of white northerners.⁴⁷ As Higginson and his unit continued to improve their military preparedness in the latter part of 1862, Lincoln and his administration worked the final kinks out of Lincoln's upcoming major announcement.

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. Scholars have since debated what the proclamation did or did not do. What the proclamation certainly did was raise the spirits of Beaufort's residents, freedmen as well as Union soldiers. General Saxton had prepared New Year's Day festivities to take place on Camp Saxton, where Union troops and Higginson's regiment were billeted. They expected over five thousand in attendance, including Union soldiers, white visitors, and many freed people from Beaufort. Higginson's men had arranged over ten oxen to be roasted and several other dishes prepared. That evening, Lincoln's Proclamation was read aloud, and military colors were presented to Higginson's unit. Black attendees began to sing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." Of the event, Higginson wrote, "voices sang on, verse after verse; others of the colored people joined in...I never saw anything so electric...it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed."⁴⁸

Also present for the reading was Susie King Taylor. Like the others there that day, Taylor was enamored by the words of Lincoln's proclamation. "It was a glorious day for us all, and we enjoyed every minute of it, and as a fitting close and the crowning event of this occasion we had a grand barbeque." The attendees enjoyed the roasted oxen and "sang or shouted 'Hurrah!' all through the camp and seemed overflowing with fun and frolic until taps were sounded, when many, no doubt, dreamt of this memorable day."⁴⁹ The presence of thousands of Beaufort's Black population mixed with hundreds of Whites shows how much Beaufort had changed in such a short time. The Union occupation of Beaufort had transformed

⁴⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 4.

⁴⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 3-4.

⁴⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 15.

⁴⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 18.

⁴⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 36-41.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 49.

the area. Higginson, however, believed his men were better fitted for “offensive operations” and not just garrison duty. Higginson wanted to prove that his unit was capable of military prowess, and he would be granted the opportunity.⁵⁰

In the middle of January 1863, Higginson and the 1st South Carolina Volunteers were given their first true military mission. Their objective was to penetrate enemy territory and return with as much lumber as possible. Southern pine was of necessity for military usage, and previous White units were unable to return with any. Although not a glorious task, it was still an important operation which would help the Union cause.⁵¹ Higginson took 462 men, three steamers, and a few invited guests, up the St. Mary’s River and into enemy territory.⁵² By the end of the mission, the 1st South Carolina Volunteers engaged the enemy in minor skirmishes, killing several of them, and returned with the southern pine. The local knowledge of the land possessed by his troops, and their bravery on their recent excursion showcased the benefits and abilities of Higginson’s Black troops. So valuable were his men, Higginson wrote, “I would not have consented to repeat the enterprise with the bravest white troops.”⁵³ Higginson’s successful mission brought new life into the Department of the South and “afforded a new sensation”.⁵⁴ Higginson’s headquarters noticed the sensation, too, and gave him another mission.

The 1st South Carolina Volunteers were about to be truly tested. Their orders, issued March 5, 1863, stated:

The main objects of your expedition are to carry the proclamation of freedom to the enslaved; to call all loyal men into the service of the United States; to occupy as much of the state of Florida as possible with the forces under your command; and to neglect no means consistent with the usages of civilized warfare to weaken, harass, and annoy those who are in rebellion against the Government of the United States.⁵⁵

This was an enormous task for the unit, especially since Florida had already been invaded and subsequently evacuated twice before by two different Union commanders. Union intelligence suspected fewer rebel troops than were previously there when it had been taken before. However, Higginson and his freedmen turned soldiers had proven their military value in their recent mission and were to be trusted with their newest undertaking.⁵⁶ A reporter for the *New York Tribune* wrote, “these negro soldiers will have more important work on hand than standing behind breastworks and offering themselves up as food for the forces of the South.”⁵⁷

The 1st South Carolina Volunteers’ expedition to Jacksonville, Florida, tested their mettle. They encountered small arms fire and artillery barrages. They were forced to maneuver against enemy forces

⁵⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 56-61.

⁵¹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 61-63.

⁵² Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 64.

⁵³ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 94.

⁵⁴ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 97.

⁵⁵ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 99-100.

⁵⁶ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 98.

⁵⁷ “Gen. Hunter’s Latest Orders,” *New York Daily Tribune*, March 16, 1863.

and, at times, live off the land.⁵⁸ The troops lived under the constant fear of rebel attack as the Confederate forces were never far from Jacksonville. Higginson's men constantly improved their defensive positions and maintained pickets to ensure the security of their operating base. Additionally, Higginson's troops were always fearful of nighttime attacks on their billeting areas. The nearby Confederate forces threatened to burn the entire city so the Union could not continue to operate out of it. Higginson had his men sleep inside brick buildings in case the enemy sneaked through their perimeter at night and tried to burn the town.⁵⁹ To extend their position, Higginson had his men fell trees and cut down anything that obstructed their view. Every day they extended their lines and provided pickets to guard the men performing the backbreaking work. Several times rebel forces attacked the Black troops; however, bravery and calmness under fire allowed them to repulse the assaults.⁶⁰ The fortifications, picket lines which extended one and a half mile from the town's center, and support by naval gun boats on the nearby rivers led Higginson to believe his Black troops could repulse an attack from a force much larger than his own.⁶¹ From slavery to soldiering, the Beaufort District's population had changed.

Such a change for the area's freed population is seen in Susie King Taylor's ability to join Higginson's regiment for the military expedition to Florida. Taylor remained close to the soldiers and was in danger of being hit by Confederate shelling.⁶² Such confidence was placed in Susie that the troops trusted her to the important task of weapon maintenance. The men even taught Taylor how to shoulder and fire the weapon. She stated, "I assisted in cleaning the guns and used to fire them off, to see if the cartridges were dry, before cleaning and reloading, each day. I thought this great fun. I was also able to take a gun all apart and put it together again."⁶³ Taylor's time with the army exposed her to the brutalities of war. Far from her initial duties as a laundress, Taylor's passion for her newly found purpose allowed her to help men with their wounds. "It seems strange how our aversion to seeing suffering is overcome in war, how we are able to see the most sickening sights, such as men with their limbs blown off and mangled by the deadly shells." Rather than run and hide, Taylor's devotion to the 1st South Carolina Volunteers kept her near their side. "Instead of turning away, how we hurry to assist in alleviating their pain, bind up their wounds, and press the cool water to their parched lips, with feelings only of sympathy and pity."⁶⁴ Taylor went on to note that although she was originally employed to serve as a laundress for the company, she "did very little of it, because I was always busy doing other things through the camp and was employed all the time doing something for the officers and comrades."⁶⁵ Much after the war, Higginson still remembered Susie King Taylor and her exemplary character. In 1902 Higginson wrote of Taylor that she "was very exceptional among the colored

⁵⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 126-130.

⁵⁹ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 115-119.

⁶⁰ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 123.

⁶¹ Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty*, 125-126.

⁶² Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 55-57.

⁶³ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 61.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 87-88.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*, 91.

laundresses, in that she could read and write and had taught children to do the same; and her whole life and career were most estimable, both during the war and in the later period.”⁶⁶

The 1st South Carolina Volunteers left Jacksonville, Florida, after their month-long campaign. They went on to serve picket duty for the Department of the South, finding themselves outside the Beaufort area several times. The spring and summer of 1864 saw Colonel Higginson resign due to a wound he received, and the 1st South Carolina Volunteers were restructured and re-titled the 33rd United States Colored Troops. The regiment stayed within the Sea Islands until February 1865 from which they moved up and down the coastline between Charleston and Savannah. In a fitting fashion, the 33rd United States Colored Troops were mustered out of service “at Fort Wagner, above the graves of [Colonel Robert Gould] Shaw and his men [of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment].”⁶⁷

After the Battle of Port Royal in November 1861 and the subsequent Union occupation of the Beaufort District, life was forever different for every single one of Beaufort’s residents. Many whites never returned home and for the ones who did, their town and its society were starkly different than they could have ever imagined. For the Black residents, they gained more than just freedom. The Day of the Big Gun Shoot altered the lives of over 10,000 enslaved people within the Sea Islands. Some took part in a governmental exercise, allowing them to be a part of a free labor experiment, getting paid for work they previously did under chattel slavery. Additionally, some freed women encountered newly found responsibilities and became members of a new society. Most astonishing, some formerly enslaved men were able to turn from freedmen to soldiers. Frederick Douglass wrote in August of 1863, “Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S.; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned his right to citizenship.”⁶⁸ Not many others besides Douglass himself knew that better than Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Although Higginson’s regiment consisted of fewer than 1,000 troops, his impact affected all of Beaufort. Higginson’s regiment offered an opportunity to Beaufort’s Black community that never would have existed without the town’s occupation. Although the 1st South Carolina Volunteers did not engage in major battles in the American Civil War, their service was a watershed moment in American history. Beaufort had transformed from a slave society to a government-led experiment which gave thousands of enslaved people their freedom and an opportunity to serve as some of the first Black troops of the Civil War.

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⁶⁷ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 264-265.

⁶⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Douglass’ Monthly*, August 1863, https://archive.org/details/sim_douglass-monthly_1863-06_5_13/mode/2up (accessed January 29, 2023).

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